

Western issues Path 15 environmental analysis; Public comments invited

Western Area Power Administration has analyzed the environmental impacts that would result from building a new 500-kV transmission line—known as the Path 15 Project—from Los Banos Substation, west of Los Banos, to Gates Substation, near Coalinga, Calif. We've provided a summary of our findings below. You can download the entire report at www.wapa.gov/SN/path15links.htm, or call us at 1-866-290-9686 (toll-free) for a copy of the report.

You are invited to comment on the analysis and the project itself by writing or e-mailing us (see back cover for address info). You are also invited to participate in evening workshops in Coalinga, Aug. 27 and Los Banos, Aug. 28.

Project background

If you read our July 2001 newsletter, you may want to skip over this background. But if this is your first exposure to the project, this information can help you make sense of the impacts discussion.

► *Why is a transmission line being considered?*

There is a bottleneck in the transmission system—"the western power grid"—that transports

electricity throughout the western states. This bottleneck is known to transmission planners as "Path 15." The effect of this bottleneck is similar to having an Interstate freeway suddenly drop from three to two lanes. It slows everything down, and when traffic is particularly heavy, it backs up traffic for several states. Normally, as much as 4,000 megawatts can pass through the bottleneck area. But when the transmission system is overloaded, as little as 900 MW gets through.

These transmission lines carry large amounts of electricity from state to state to keep our homes and businesses supplied with power. The bottleneck in the system not only contributes to California's energy woes, it hurts the entire western United States.

► *What's being done to get the problem solved?*

Both the State of California and the Federal government are taking steps to solve the problem, on parallel tracks. The California Public Utility Commission has directed Pacific Gas & Electric Company to conduct the environmental and planning studies necessary to obtain state permits to build the project.



Gates Substation, near Coalinga, would be the southern terminal for the new 500-kV line.

Because of the urgency of the project, U.S. Energy Secretary Abraham also directed Western, which is part of the U.S. Department of Energy, to complete the planning, funding and environmental work necessary to build the project.

In the late 1980s, PG&E considered building a Los Banos-Gates transmission line that would have addressed the same problem. This project was discussed in an Environmental Impact Statement prepared for a larger interstate project known as the California-Oregon Transmission Project. Most of the COTP project was built, but at the time, the Los Banos-Gates portion of the project didn't seem economically feasible because PG&E's existing lines could provide the necessary transmission.

Because the Los Banos-Gates project was covered in this earlier document, Western won't have to

prepare a whole new Environmental Impact Statement. That would take at least a couple of years. Instead, Western has prepared an environmental "Supplement Analysis" that considers whether things have changed enough since the EIS was prepared to justify additional environmental work. If things haven't changed significantly, no further studies are needed, and Western can complete all the reports necessary to proceed with the project.

As part of the CPUC process, PG&E is also preparing supplemental environmental documents to comply with California environmental laws. PG&E has been conducting planning and environmental studies. In July, the CPUC held public meetings to receive comments on the project. Most attendees were potentially affected landowners with questions about how the project would impact their property. For more information on the CPUC process, check the Commission's Web site at <http://www.CPUC.ca.gov>.

Check "special announcements" or search for "Path 15."

► **Which studies will be used, California's or Western's?**

Quite possibly, both. It depends on who actually ends up building the line. It could be built by PG&E or Western, and it could even be built with private investment. Western asked for and received proposals from private parties interested in helping finance and co-own the project and is currently evaluating these proposals.

It's conceivable that both Federal and state agencies will be involved in the project, in which case both CEQA (the California environmental law) and NEPA (the Federal environmental law) requirements will need to be met. Because of the urgency to get the line built, it makes sense to be working on both state and Federal levels so there won't be any delays later. PG&E and Western are coordinating their study efforts to reduce duplication and minimize contradictions.

Supplement Analysis Results

Western's Supplement Analysis attempts to answer three questions:

1. Is the project being proposed significantly different than that proposed in the 1988 EIS?
2. Are there new laws, new regulations or new information about the resources in the area?

3. Based on the answers to those two questions, are new environmental consequences predicted?

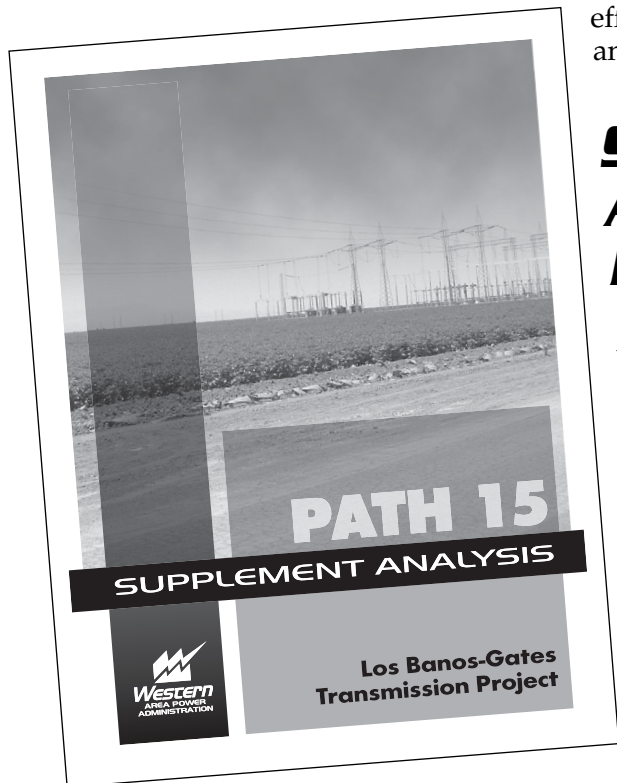
► **Are there changes in what's being proposed?**

Western's proposed project is essentially the same as the preferred alternative described in the environmental reports prepared for the 1988 Los Banos-Gates Transmission Project. It includes about 84 miles of new 500-kV transmission line, some realignment of an existing transmission line to bring two lines into the same substation, modifications within the Los Banos and Gates substations and a possible upgrade of an existing 230-kV transmission line known as Gates-Arco-Midway.

► **What impacts were originally predicted?**

PG&E's proposed route is essentially the same as Western's current proposal. It is located primarily in the western foothills, mostly on grazing land covered with native vegetation. Alternatives to the proposed route would be on the San Joaquin Valley floor and would have significantly more impact upon irrigated agriculture.

The Summary of Key Findings table on page 3 summarizes the 1988 findings and compares them to Western's current findings. The impacts predicted in the 1988 report included some loss of soil due to erosion during construction and upkeep. One hundred fifty-three acres of land would be used for towers and access roads. Although the proposed route is primarily through rolling hills and rangeland, some acres of productive farmland would be lost



and restrictions on development would be established in the right-of-way.

The local economy would benefit during construction. But, long-term, the loss of farmlands would result in minor negative impacts upon the regional and local economies. The potential exists for some impact upon rare and endangered species and cul-

tural resources during construction. These impacts can be minimized by consultation with responsible state and Federal agencies when the tower sites and access roads are located and during construction.

► ***Are there significant changes in laws, regulations or information?***

PG&E ordered a number of new biological studies as part of its work, and this provided significant new information about rare, threatened and endangered plant and animal species. Other new information included: several studies of cultural sites in the area, updated land-use inventories and land-use plans and information on the status of projects and developments identified in the 1988 EIS.

There are new regulations regarding air quality, new safety codes regarding construction and new listings of threatened and endangered species. Western has also revised its own safety and construction codes. There is a new Federal requirement to evaluate "environmental justice." This means that Western must evaluate whether the project adversely affects low income, disadvantaged or minority residents more than the general population.

► ***Are significant new impacts expected?***

Western's conclusions about any new environmental consequences are also shown in the summary of findings. The recent vegetation and wildlife studies reinforce the need for careful coordination with responsible state and Federal agencies when sites for towers and access roads are

Summary of Key Findings

Environmental Resources	1988 Finding of Significant Impacts	New Information	New Environmental Consequences	Follow Up Actions
Irretrievable Commitment of Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fuel and building materials during construction Up to 3,300 tons of topsoil erosion during construction 	None	No	Design, construct and operate to minimize use of resources
Air Quality	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recent regulations Changed air quality conditions 	No	Mitigation measures —such as watering —during construction
Earth Resources	Loss of soil due to erosion	Updated safety codes	No	Geotechnical studies for site selection
Water Resources and Fisheries	No	Recent recreation information	No	Mitigation and coordination with the California Department of Water Resources
Vegetation	153 acres of lost vegetation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New listings of threatened and endangered species New biological survey New land use inventories 	No	Mitigation and consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disturbance during construction Birds colliding with wires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New listings of threatened and endangered species New biological survey 	No	Mitigation and consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game
Land Use and Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of productive farmlands Restricted development in right-of-way Interference with agricultural practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated land use inventories Updated county land use plans 	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negotiate easements Mitigation and coordination with federal, state, and local agencies
Visual Resources	Transmission line visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised population figures Updated recreational usage 	No	Select least intrusive tower materials
Socioeconomics & Environmental Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of productive farmlands Minor impacts on regional and local economies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal requirement to analyze environmental justice Changed economic conditions 	Non-significant impacts on minority populations similar to non-minority populations	Negotiate easements
Corona, Field and Safety Considerations	No	Updated Western policies based on most recent codes and scientific findings	No	Comply with updated code
Cultural and Paleontological Resources	Four disturbed cultural sites	Updated cultural studies provide slightly better understanding of affected environment	No	Programmatic Agreement with the State Historical Preservation Office, tribes and other project participants

picked, and when construction practices are adopted. But the new information did not change the predicted size or kind of impacts upon vegetation, wildlife or cultural resources.

While the loss of farmland would produce minor impacts on the local economy (beneficial in the short-term and mildly negative in the long-term), these impacts would not affect low-income, disadvantaged or minority populations differently from the population as a whole.

What's the 'bottom line'?

As a result of this analysis, Western has concluded that there are not any substantial changes to the significant environmental impacts identified in the 1988 Final Environmental Impact Statement. As a result, a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement is not needed.

Project timeline

August 27-28

- ▶ Public workshops in Coalinga and Los Banos

September

- ▶ Western's recommendation goes to Secretary of Energy
- ▶ DOE issues Record of Decision or Supplement Analysis

How can you participate?

- You can get all the latest information about the Path 15 project by logging in to our Web site, at **www.wapa.gov**. Click on "Path 15" in the News Desk. If you don't have a computer, you can access the Internet at the Los Banos and Coalinga libraries. We've also set up a repository of actual documents at both those sites.

- To receive periodic information on the project or make a comment, send us an e-mail (**Path15@wapa.gov**), complete the attached comment card, call us toll-free at 1-866-290-9686 or write us at: Tom Boyko, Path 15 Project Manager, Western Area Power Administration, 114 Parkshore Drive, Folsom, CA, 95630-4710.

- Attend one of our public meetings:


August 27, 2001, 7 p.m.

Coalinga Library Program Room,
305 N. 4th Street
(4th and Durian),
Coalinga

August 28, 2001, 7 p.m.

City Council Chambers
Los Banos City Hall
520 J Street
Los Banos

Please note that these will be "workshops" rather than formal public comment meetings. We will provide an opportunity for informal discussion and a chance to have your questions answered.

To submit a formal comment on the project, please mail your comments to: Tom Boyko, Path 15 Project Manager, Western Area Power Administration, 114 Parkshore Drive, Folsom, CA, 95630-4710 or fill out the enclosed form. ***We must receive your comments by Sept. 4, 2001.*** 

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
WESTERN AREA POWER ADMINISTRATION
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MAIL IN CARD

FEEDBACK WANTED!!!

Western wants to know your views about the Path 15 proposal.

- ☐ **YES.** Please keep me updated about the Path 15 project.
- ☐ **NO.** Save a tree. I'll get the information from the Web site.
- ☐ **PLEASE CONTACT ME** about my concerns/answer a question.

Name: _____

Title (if any): _____ Organization (if any): _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: () _____ E-mail: _____

Comments about the Path 15 project: _____

Comments about our environmental analysis: _____

Want to learn more about the Path 15 upgrade proposal?

- Log on to our Web site: ***www.wapa.gov*** and click on "Path 15"
- Review background information at the public libraries in Los Banos and Coalinga
- Attend a public workshop in Los Banos or Coalinga:

7 p.m., Aug. 27

Coalinga Library Program Room
395 N. 4th Street (4th and Durian)
Coalinga

7 p.m., Aug 28

City Council Chambers
Los Banos City Hall
Los Banos

Have comments to share with us about the proposed project? Send them to us by Sept. 4, 2001.

Mail to: Tom Boyko

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Western Area Power Administration

114 Parkshore Drive

Folsom, CA 95630-4710

E-mail: Path 15@wapa.gov

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